

Women's Liberation in Nepal, Past and Future: an Interview

Saturday 25 February 2012, by [GHARTI Jayapuri](#), [WEILL Jim](#) (Date first published: 2010).

"We need to have a society where there is total equality between men and women. We want to eradicate all feudalist, capitalist and patriarchal visions. We want to create a new society where there is no inequality. Our goal is not only the Nepalese people, but we also want to make equality in class, gender, ethnic, regional and other kinds of oppression across the whole world."

Intro and Interview By Jim Weill

Without the courageous contributions of people like Jayapuri Gharti aka 'Namuna,' there would be no revolution in Nepal, no people's war, no constituent assembly, no radical change in social relations. Gharti is from the Rolpa district, a largely rural area of Western Nepal, and has been involved in feminist and communist politics since 1990. She is the president of the Central Committee of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist or UCPN(M), a leader of All-Nepal Women's Association (Revolutionary), a member of Nepal's Constituent Assembly, and was a fighter in the Maoist people's war (1996-2006). During the current peace process she has been at the forefront of struggles for political equality and women's liberation.

Can you tell us about the history of women's struggles in Nepal before the people's war period?

Jayapuri Gharti - Nepalese women were very much oppressed by patriarchal society. They had to stay under their father's or husband's or son's rule. They didn't have voting rights until 1977, when they got very limited voting rights.

Society didn't want women to involve themselves in politics or to get education. Women had no right to private property. Socially and culturally, the women of Nepal were second-level citizens. The tradition was, for example, that women should not eat their food before their husbands. If they did that, the tradition said, the husband would die. Wives had no right to speak to any other people, except their husbands. If they did that, they would be punished. Women were also expected to do all the housework.

I had to run away from home in order to involve myself in politics.

There was another conservative idea that women should not go outside with their children. But we had a lot of women go outside with their children during political events, rallies, and uprisings. The extreme patriarchal system treated women like beasts, animals. The people's war broke all these things. We broke approximately 75% of the conservative thinking. So, maybe 25% of that thinking continues.

The central committee of the women's association decided that women should wear shirts and pants.

They have a campaign to make shorter hair as well. The concept was that women who keep very long hair were 'nice and good'. In the village, women would wear very long and difficult dresses. You couldn't run or fight in these things. The sari made it very difficult to do outdoor work or engage in social activities.

Even now in the political society, people think that being a woman leader means wearing a sari and being very heavy. They are supposed to look like they are from the middle class.

Tell us more about your political background and how you got involved in politics.

There are two main reasons I became a communist. One is the poverty of my family and my society. My family was affected by the class oppression. Another thing was the gender issue, gender oppression. I felt that kind of oppression in my family and the society also. Because of these two causes, I got involved in communist politics.

I got involved in communist party politics by 1990. At that time we were working in the students' front, and at that time the state made a public case against us. After 4 years, in 1994, the state charged us, tried to take us to court and to arrest us, and we became clandestine, underground. From that time, we worked underground until the peace process (2006).

In my village there was the thinking that no women, no girls should go to school. In my village, the first girl who went to school was my older sister, then me. One woman from the second generation of girls to go to school completed high school.

After this, I got involved in the people's war, got married in the people's war, and had a child in the people's war. I was involved in several battles with my child.

Can you tell us more about the experience of women who had children during the people's war?

Nothing can be said about the difficulties of those days. There were very many difficulties. There were no facilities for sleeping, or anything. They had to walk everywhere while organizing people. There was no stability and they had to face a lot of hard conditions.

Every woman who became pregnant faced these kinds of difficulties. I took my child with myself and had to walk all night with the child and had to walk with the child for 3 months. My child caught pneumonia. I thought my child was going to die, so I had to leave the small child with villagers. But, fortunately, the child is alive and is 12 years old. It is very difficult to tell this story. [We pause. This is a difficult subject for Jayapuri to discuss].

The women from that village cared for my child and brought her up. In this way, the people help the people's war and women leaders.

Was there controversy over women joining the People's Liberation Army (PLA)?

At the very beginning, there were few women involved in the people's war. Part of being in the PLA required walking together with boys and men, and in Nepalese society, walking with men like this was not considered appropriate. But they continued, and taught villagers about their politics of liberation. A lot of women started to get involved in the people's war at this point. Women's political consciousness increased as well. Because of this process, we taught women in the villages about the feminist movement and prepared them for resistance against the state and police.

At that time, domestic violence inside families was a very common practice. The PLA taught women

and girls about those problems. They heard these instructions and began to get involved in the people's army, in politics and other mass organizations. They were also involved in public activities, development work and other work around infrastructure. In this way a large number of women were involved in the building of society. The difference between the two genders became very faint. People understood that women and men are not very different in social activities and other things.

How have women's lives changed in Nepal through their participation in the people's war and the PLA?

It changed a lot of things. Especially the involvement of women in the people's war showed the women involved that they can do things the same as men. Mentally and physically, women gained confidence. This helped contribute to gender equality in society. It helped banish those kinds of differences and discrimination.

I want to give an example. After we recruited many women into the PLA, the national army, the Royal Nepalese Army, [the army of counter-revolution in Nepal] also recruited some women into their force, about 5%. This is a very important example of changes in Nepalese society.

Has the fight for women's liberation changed during the peace process?

During the people's war, the PLA was 40% women. Women were also involved in party organizations and other organizations at that ratio. Now the Constituent Assembly is 33% women. This kind of change was made possible by the people's war. Before this, in the government and in the army, women were maybe 1 or 2% of these forces.

We have had the experience that in the crucial period, the people's war period, there was a very large participation of women, oppressed people and indigenous people. In the peace process and especially when the movement came closer to power, the oppressed sectors of society and women and other parts of the population faced discrimination. We were enthusiastic people – women and other nationalities were very enthusiastic during the time of war. We feel that in this situation, in peace, their morale is very much reduced. Their opportunities are reduced also.

I feel that when the rights of oppressed people are not established, this kind of deviation comes out. This situation comes when the revolution is not clear, is not accomplished and rights are not established.

How would you like to see the party move forward in this period?

We are discussing inside our party, how to establish the rights of people and how to complete the revolution. We are now trying to fix the rights of people in the new constitution. If these rights are not established, a new struggle is very much necessary.

Political leaders in Nepal still have patriarchal and feudal concepts, so we are still fighting against them. In the interim constitution, it is written that 33% of the government should be composed of women.

Until recently only 2 of the 27 ministers were women. One was from the UML, and one was from our party, which was me. Our party had to rethink these issues. The central committee decided to send new ministers to the Constituent Assembly (CA). They corrected their mistake, and now have made their CA ministers 33% women. I waged a movement to fight for this change for 4 months.

I want to synthesize my explanation. Before the people's war, the women didn't have any economic, political and social rights. With this peace process, women have achieved legal rights. One is that,

under the interim constitution, any post of the government needs to consist of 33% women. Also, we have made a new provision that citizenship can be conferred through the mother, and not only the father. Women also have right to property. In the former time, only sons had the right to inherit the property of their fathers. But now, the daughters also have the right to equal property. In short, the new kind of social values are established, which are very favorable to women in Nepal. In the new constitution, we want to include more proportional and inclusive rights.

Are there other demands, other than constitutional demands, that the women's association has been raising?

We need to have a society where there is total equality between men and women. We want to eradicate all feudal, capitalist and patriarchal visions. We want to create a new society where there is no inequality. Our goal is not only the Nepalese people, but we also want to make equality in class, gender, ethnic, regional and other kinds of oppression across the whole world.

There is a fight between old visions and new visions. One that wants to make a status-quoist Nepal, and one that wants to make a more equal Nepal. The new force is led by our party, and the old force is led by the Nepali Congress and the UML.

For example, we want to say that the name of the state should be the People's Federal Republic, but the other parties don't want that. They want to maintain oppression.

Do you have any final comments you would like to add?

The Nepalese revolution and the struggle to establish the Nepalese people's rights is an issue of the world struggle and resistance movement. Obviously the USA is a part of the world, and our struggles are part of the same world.

We also call the US government to recognize the legitimate struggle of the people of Nepal. The U.S. government should recognize the Nepalese people's resistance against the oppressive government in Nepal.

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<http://winterends.net/nepal-stories/101-womens-liberation-past-and-future-an-interview-with-jayapuri-gharti>